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In our view

Proper visit

Campus recruiting essential for intelligence agencies

There was some clear, perceptive talk at a University of Wisconsin-Madison hearing last week, even if it wasn't what some of those on hand wanted to hear.

About 75 people attended a hearing to discuss campus visits by recruiters for business and government. The focus was on recruiting by the Central Intelligence Agency which has sometimes led to disruptive protests on campus.

A news report said that many in the audience often hissed pro-CIA speakers, but were otherwise orderly. Anti-CIA spokesmen covered familiar ground in their protests.

The CIA should be banned because the agency has been involved in illegal activities abroad, said one student. Another speaker said that all recruiting visits should be banned because "The university should not be reduced to an employment service for corporations, government or business."

But Susan Merrick, 35, a military intelligence officer whose study for a master's degree is financed by the Army, said the CIA needs "good people" to prevent both intelligence failures and the illegal acts cited by protestors.

Law professor Gordon B. Baldwin pointed out that, "We have a moral obligation to encourage students in sufficient numbers to serve our nation in the intelligence community."

It is important that those views be heard and pondered.

Obviously, the nation needs competent intelligence agencies in an age when a faulty calculation can lead to nuclear war. Certainly, intelligence work demands

bright, creative, thoughtful people.

Merrick's point that "good people" are needed in the CIA and other agencies is well taken. One reason that the United States has sometimes been embarrassed by its intelligence corps is that the work done was neither technically competent nor morally sensitive.

If the "good people" turn their backs on government work such as intelligence service, then important national decisions will eventually be made by others who have not had the benefit of solid education.

If the CIA can't recruit on the campuses of the nation's colleges and universities, then where does it turn for people? Does it seek out alley thugs and others with little moral or ethical sensibility? Will that serve the nation well?

The answer to that question is obviously no. And the answer to the question of whether or not the CIA should recruit on the UW campus is just as obviously yes.